

Imagine you are a filmmaker. And forget for just a minute that the Book of First Kings is in the Bible. Think of it as a screenplay that someone has brought to you to read and your job is to convert it for the big screen. I think the opening scene is crucial for the story that is about to be told, and holds within it all kinds of possibilities.

I'd start with a wide-angle that allows the audience to see an old man shivering. Well, an old man by Old Testament standards, anyway. The man in question is about seventy according to the narrator. And he can't get warm. His circulation just isn't what it once was. As the camera comes in closer on his face we recognize him. Because this is a sequel of sorts and everybody knows this face—the same way you'd know the face of Abraham Lincoln or George Washington. It's King David.

Young women are sent to keep the old king warm, to no avail. I suppose a prayer shawl would work just fine, but this is King David after all. The narrator whispers to us that this isn't sexual, however. He needs to tell us that because...well, because we all know the king's reputation, because everyone remembers "Bathsheba-gate."

The world is about to change and it isn't at all clear who will be the next king. This isn't medieval Europe and David is no Tudor. Remember that he is the second king and his succession to Saul's throne was messy. So it isn't clear what will happen next. As it turns out, the son of Bathsheba and David, Solomon, will eventually come to power. We'll watch in a relatively short span of time, however, how that power corrupts him and the nation begins to unravel.

So by the time you get to the twelfth chapter of First Kings the kingdom has split in two: Judah to the south and Israel to the north. But I think you can see it in David's eyes in that very first scene. These are not glory days for God's people.

That first scene puts us on alert that things aren't what they used to be. It's like the death of King Arthur, or George Washington. By the time you get to the sixteenth chapter of the story the king of the northern kingdom, Israel, is a man named Ahab. And you don't even have to be a Biblical scholar to remember the name of Ahab's wife, *Jezebel*.

Now even if you know nothing about who Jezebel actually was (she was a Canaanite worshiper of Baal) her name echoes down through the centuries. It's not a name you give serious thought to when you find out you are going to have a little girl. No one wants to be known as a "little Jezebel," which is a little like naming your son Adolf.

The historical Jezebel was no doubt demonized and scape-goated by the men who told this story. It's always the woman's fault, right? If behind every good king is a good woman, then surely behind a bad king like Ahab there must be an evil woman. We can't know for sure what the historical Jezebel was like. But to be honest it's the wrong question. What we can know is that in the story we get—in this "screenplay," she is the one who is blamed for all that has gone wrong since the days of King David. She embodies people's fears and anxieties.

Jezebel and the Canaanites who worshipped Baal believed that Baal was the god who brought the rains, and in a desert climate, rain equals life. That is important to understand as we are introduced in chapter seventeen to a new character, one of the most important figures in the Old Testament, Elijah the Tishbite.

So we meet Elijah and he makes the claim that life is from God alone. It is impossible to overstate just how counter-cultural that claim is. It's laying down the gauntlet: Yahweh, not Baal. The Hebrew word for life is used over and over again in these next few chapters and I think that what the narrator wants us to see is that Elijah is willing to stand up in defiance of those who worship Baal by bearing witness to the God of Israel.

A drought has come over the land. That spells famine and death and poverty. The most vulnerable members of that society (and maybe any society) are widows and orphans. In a time of drought when even the rich are suffering, those at the bottom are in the greatest danger. In such times it makes sense to "take care of yourself first." Charity begins at home, right?

Elijah shows up at this widow's home. She is not a Jew, and that is important because this is a time when it is hard to find faithfulness and here as in so many other places in the Bible faith is defined not as right belief but as right practice. That is, how you treat your neighbor. Elijah shows up and says he's staying for dinner. And breakfast the next day, and lunch, and dinner...indefinitely. That is a frightening prospect for a poor widow with a child to care for. And in fact she expresses that concern. But in the end she chooses hospitality and generosity and trust. *And there is enough bread and enough water.*

It's an old story, rooted in the old story of the Exodus, where there was water and manna one day at a time. It's a new story, told in the New Testament as the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and the water into wine at Cana in Galilee. That is good news. The widow opens up her home to a stranger, and discovers that there is enough.

What might this story mean for us? I think there is a temptation to make it too magical. Now don't misunderstand me; I am not saying that there isn't a *miraculous* dimension to this story of never-ending flour and oil. I'm enough of a mystic that I don't need to try to "explain" it away. On the other end of the spectrum, however, there is this temptation to turn it into a magic trick. And when we do that we are tempted to see it as something that happens in Bible-land but has little to do with our own lives. And I think this story has *everything* to do with our lives, and how we choose to live them.

I think the point is to develop eyes that can see the miracles that are happening all around us. The first step in that process is to notice with the narrator of First Kings is pretty clear that the national media doesn't cover this stuff. It doesn't make it into the headlines in an anxious world led by Ahab and Jezebel. The national media is too concerned with the news that sells rather than the good news that brings life. So you have to know where to look for good news and very often it's on the edges, on the fringes, in the small places.

The birth of a child is a miracle, for example. It's not a magic trick but it inspires awe and wonder. The amazing advances in modern medicine are miracles that bring life out of death. How many people in this parish have had cataract surgery? Whenever the blind see we praise God—however it comes to pass. So, too, choosing generosity in a dog-eat-dog world or hospitality in a world of fear—these are miracles as well. Finding another place at the dinner table when you know the cupboard is bare; that's a miracle. That's biblical faith in action.

Anxiety over money is one of the great stresses in too many homes. Maybe yours is one of them. I've found in pastoral ministry that the stress people feel over money has very little to do with the dollar amount that gets reported on their tax returns. People who make high six figure incomes sometimes have first homes and second homes and cars that mean more is going out than coming in. That's a recipe for high levels of anxiety. And conversely, people with very modest incomes and homes are often able to manage their money in ways that allow them to give thanks for what they have, and live generous lives. We have examples of both choices right in this parish, and maybe most of us vacillate somewhere in between. We have more than most people who live on the planet—even the poorest among us. Yet even the wealthiest among us can feel impoverished when compared to those who celebrate “My Super Sweet Sixteen” parties on MTV. So how do we choose to see ourselves?

Some of the poorest people I've ever met have been the most generous. I remember spending time in Nicaragua in the 1980s, living with a family that didn't have indoor plumbing and mostly lived off of rice and beans. But when I was their guest they insisted on a little extra, including some *cervasa*. There was enough.

Hospitality to the stranger and generosity are at the very core of Biblical faith—old and new testaments alike. By choosing life in the face of death and hope in the face of despair, this widow bears witness to the power of God at work in the world—the ways that the love of God makes all things possible.

Who are the people in your life—your models, who help you to live more like that? Maybe it's someone in your biological family. But if not, then look to *this* family—to your baptismal family. Find people who choose to relate to money as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Find people who keep things in perspective and give thanks every day—regardless of whether that day brings feast or famine. Find people who live with glad and generous hearts and then try to live like that.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again today and then I'll sit down. There are two ways to be rich. One is to grasp for it all. The problem with that way is that it will never be enough, and no matter how much you accumulate you'll always be able to find someone who has more. The other path is begin each day by saying thanks for what you do have, and make the most of it. To live like this widow—counting your blessings, and sharing your daily bread, and trusting that there is enough.